Center on Islam, Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World



Jordan's Encounter with Shiism

by Khalid Sindawi
Published on Tuesday, August 17, 2010
ARTICLES
Current Trends in Islamist Ideology vol. 10

The security services of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan have in recent years become actively engaged in monitoring the activities of Shiites who are residing within their country—including Iraqi refugees, but especially what appears to be a growing number of new converts to Shiism. The security services have carried out raids, arrests and interrogations targeting some Shiite populations, and they are keeping a close eye on political and religious developments within Shiism both within Jordan and beyond. This has naturally caused Shiite refugees and converts in Jordan to be ever on their guard, and they have frequently turned to the traditional practice of *taqiyya*, or dissimulation, according to which Shiites are permitted to hide their true beliefs in case of danger. Needless to say, this tactic has made the task of the Jordanian security services more difficult.

An obvious question comes to mind: Why have the Jordanian security services given this matter of Shiism and of conversion to Shiism so much attention? There are in fact a number of reasons.

First, although conversion to Shiism is not a widespread phenomenon in Jordan today, the fact that it is occurring worries Jordanian authorities, since the country is overwhelmingly Sunni and has historically been untouched by sectarian strife. The Jordanian security services fear that conversion to Shiism will grow dramatically and beyond their control, and that this might expose Jordan to the ethnic and sectarian conflicts that have been on the rise in recent times in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Jordan's rulers seek to avoid such conflicts at any cost, having witnessed the unrest in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and other Muslim-majority countries.

Second, Jordan's ruler's worries about Shiism are a function of their deep concerns about the growing influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Middle East. They worry not simply about Iran's growing religious influence but Iran's potential political influence over Shiites and new converts. One area of particular concern for the Jordanians is Hezbollah's growing profile, including the ties it has formed with Hamas and the support it gets from the Muslim Brotherhood. Some worry that, because of Iran's influence over this Hezbollah-Brotherhood alliance, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood may not be inclined to stem any future wave of conversion to Shiism among its own numerous Jordanian and Palestinian members, should this begin to occur. Not all agree with this view, however. One member of the Jordanian parliament, Muhammad Aqel, who belongs to the Muslim Brotherhood, believes that the alliance will not bring widespread conversion. He claims that conversion to Shiism is much more likely to occur among youths whose religious beliefs are based on emotion and who have not received a proper Sunni religious education (i.e., not Muslim Brotherhood members).

Be this as it may, the Jordanian security services are keenly aware of the potential military and political deterioration in the Middle East. Currently, the region's politics is increasingly divided between two camps. One is led by Iran and includes Syria and various Islamic movements such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad; the other, which might be called the "Arab moderate camp," consists of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The relationships between these two camps are fraught with tension and could deteriorate suddenly and with little warning. Unrest could easily encompass broad sections of the Arab public everywhere, leading to immense internal challenges for Arab regimes.

Many Arab rulers see themselves in an ideological competition with the Iranian-led camp. The behavior of Hezbollah and the carefully crafted speeches of its secretary general Hassan Nasrallah, as well as the purposely aggressive stance taken by the Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad against Israel and America, is clearly meant for the ears of Arab and Islamic public opinion. These leaders' antagonistic posturing may well arouse popular support for the Iranian and Shiite camp and push many young people into the arms of the Iranians, particularly if the military and political situation in the region worsens.

At the same time Arab leaders in the moderate camp face a difficult situation because of their position on the Arab-Israeli conflict and their relations with America. Popular anger in the Arab world is rising for several reasons. These include America's ongoing support for Israel; the collapse of the peace process and the lack of any sign that Israel is making an effort to restart it; the poor results of the second Arab initiative in

the Security Council; and the Palestinians' inability to resolve their internal differences. Popular feelings of discontent and anger do not stop with Israel and the United States, but are also directed at moderate Arab allies. Arab leaders have warned the U.S. administration that if the Palestinian problem is ignored, America's friends in the region will face difficulty and spreading radicalism. In their view, if a confrontation transpires, the Iranian axis will most certainly exploit it for its own military and political benefit.

* * *

The Jordanian security services have begun constructing a detailed database of Iraqi Shiites who are active in Amman in light of reliable information that some of these Shiites have extremist tendencies and are in close contact with Iran and its intelligence and military organizations. Jordanian converts to Shiism are routinely investigated and supervised to prevent them from engaging in missionary activities. Furthermore, security sources confirm that anyone proven to be engaged in Shiite missionary work is immediately deported from Jordan. Indeed, 23 Iraqis accused of "disseminating Shiism" among members of the Muslim Brotherhood in the al-Baqaa refugee camp were deported.[1] The security forces also search Shiite bookshops in Amman to ensure that they are not selling books that encourage conversion. Many such books are imported from Lebanon and Syria; others have been brought into the country by Iraqi Shiites since 1990, where they have been copied and reprinted.

Middle East analysts are not all in agreement whether conversion to Shiism poses a security and political risk to Jordan or whether there is an attendant danger of Iranian influence. For instance, the analyst Jamil al-Nimri believes that although conversion to Shiism is, at the moment, quite limited, it nonetheless represents an Iranian bridgehead that could become significant in the event of a regional confrontation between Iran and the United States. Nimri distinguishes between religious and political adoption of Shiism; he also thinks that Jordan's security could indeed be threatened if it turns out that information about the existence of Iranian cells in Jordan is true, and that these cells are activated in case of a regional crisis.

On the other hand, the political analyst and head of the Jerusalem Center for Political Studies, Urayb al-Rantawi, sees no reason for the Jordanian authorities to be worried about Iranian influence. He believes that such fears are fed by America, which wants to create what he calls "Iranophobia," in an effort to persuade people that the real danger to Arab societies is posed by Iran rather than Israel. Al-Rantawi believes that the geographical and demographic barriers between Iran and Jordan are such that Jordan is neither in danger from Shiism nor likely to fall under Iranian influence, unlike some other Arab countries which may have reason to worry. On the contrary, al-Rantawi maintains that it would be dangerous to try to create a military or political crisis with Iran and the Shiite forces in the Middle East.

Al-Rantawi also raises interesting questions: what would happen if Iran and the United States eventually made a deal with each other? In such a scenario, what would Jordan have gained by pursuing a policy that was hostile toward Iran?

*** * ***

In trying to keep track of conversions to Shiism, one of the difficulties faced by Jordanian security forces is the fact that the process of conversion usually proceeds in stages. The first step in the adoption of the Shiite creed is the development of sympathy towards the idea of the Shiite imamate, or the affirmation of the right of the Prophet's descendants to lead the Muslim community. This includes the belief that the Prophet's family was greatly wronged by the Prophet's Companions and later by Muslim states (especially the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates). In other words, the prospective convert accepts the Shiite claim that Ali b. Abi Talib was the legitimate successor to the Prophet and not Abu Bakr, Umar or the subsequent caliphs accepted by Sunni tradition. Furthermore, the prospective convert believes that Ali's descendants are the true leaders of the Muslim nation who have been unjustly deprived of their position and authority.

The second step in the conversion of those who have been convinced of Ali's right to rule and of the injustice done to his descendants consists of studying the Shiite creed and its religious law. A convert to Shiism is called "enlightened" (*mustabsir*), meaning someone who has seen the right way and affirms the importance of the Prophet's family, loving it with all his heart. The enlightened, who quite often immerse themselves in the study of Shiite books on faith and law, confess to having intimate spiritual links with the *hawza* of the city of Qom in Iran and with the wider community of other enlightened "perceivers" in the Arab world. CDs produced in Qom tell the stories of the "Arab enlightened." Today the Zaynab hawza in Damascus is one of the main centers of the enlightened. Here they study, tighten their links with other Shiites from the region, and obtain books written by Shiite imams and religious authorities.

Interestingly enough, the Arab enlightened, unlike actual Shiites, are not required to pay the "fifth,"[2] nor are they required to subject themselves to the rulings of any particular religious authority. This, after all, would reveal their conversion status, and would ultimately increase their vulnerability to interrogation by the authorities.

Furthermore, they make frequent use of taqiyya and deny the fact of their conversion to Shiism, which helps them to avoid trouble.

Although Shiite communities have lived in the Arab world for centuries, the “Shiite question” has never existed in the Middle East as it does today. Iranian influence waned during the 1990s, when the reformists headed by former leader Muhammad Khatami attempted to improve relations with the neighboring Arab states and promised not to export the revolution. However, “Khatami’s perestroika” did not last long, and today the mullahs once again dictate Iran’s foreign policy. Iran’s nuclear program has helped it gain more influence, as the American involvement in Iraq deteriorated.

For all of these reasons and others, Jordanian officials believe that there are Shiite sleeper cells operating in their country. Broad segments of Jordanian society expressed enthusiastic support for Hezbollah during its recent war against Israel, and the Jordanian authorities are aware of the growing Iranian and Shiite influence throughout the region, by way of the Iran-Syria axis, reinforced by various Islamic movements. In the Arab world in general, Iranian influence is viewed with some alarm, as reflected in statements made by leaders of the group of moderate Arab states, whose central members (Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan) openly warn against Iranian influence and express suspicion over the political loyalty of Arab Shiites. In addition, newspaper articles in these countries regularly warn that Iranian President Ahmadinejad and his colleagues are making attempts to export Iran’s Islamic Revolution once again.

* * *

Several factors have contributed to the phenomenon of conversion to Shiism in Jordan. First, broad segments of Jordanian society were impressed by Hezbollah’s performance in its 2006 war with Israel. Some Jordanians who were thus impressed underwent a “political conversion” to Shiism, which was later followed by religious conversion. Most of these converts were residents of Palestinian refugee camps, mainly on the outskirts of Amman. Among the converts were also a number of Jordanians belonging to prominent families from al-Salt, al-Tufayla and al-Badiya.[3] Informed sources claim that 150 families converted in the al-Baqaa refugee camp, mostly after Hezbollah launched rocket attacks against northern Israel. [4]

According to some sources, numerous Jordanian youths went to Lebanon after the war and visited Hezbollah camps. Some of these youths converted to Shiism, and then returned to Jordan. In the opinion of observers, Hezbollah’s psychological and morale achievements at the time were exploited in Jordan, where conversion had thus far been very limited; Shiism was given a push by the “divine victory” over Israel and by Nasrallah’s new standing as a hero among the Arab public. This also encouraged Iraqi Shiites in Jordan to speak openly about their faith and to further the claim that Hezbollah was assisted by God in its war against Israel.

There is strong evidence that growing numbers of Jordanians traveled to Damascus and Lebanon during the 2006 war and in its aftermath, where they visited Shiite shrines. Hundreds of them returned after converting to Shiism and went on to convince their families to convert as well, using religious and historical arguments to prove that the Shiite creed is truer than Sunnism.

Another factor in these conversions is Shiite satellite channels, which have become influential in Jordan and other Arab countries, especially after the occupation of Iraq. Today there are around 20 such channels, which broadcast Shiite sermons and traditions, making a considerable impact on public opinion. The more important of these channels are al-Fayhaa,[5] al-Anwar,[6] al-Kawthar[7] and Ahlulbayt.[8] Among their best-known preachers are Muhammmd al-Waili and Abd al-Hamid al-Muhajir.

The Shiite station that has had perhaps the greatest influence over Arab public opinion in recent years is Hezbollah’s al-Manar.[9] Many people watch the station for its news broadcasts—especially since the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel military confrontation—but the station also broadcasts Shiite religious propaganda. For instance, a Jordanian husband reported that his wife used to watch the station because she was impressed with Hezbollah, but late at night it would broadcast programs whose religious content did not accord with the Sunni view, and he consequently forbade her to watch the station.

The Internet also plays a significant role in conversions to Shiism. According to a Jordanian media expert, the proportion of Jordanians who access Shiite websites is one of the highest in the Arab world. Shiite missionary websites number in the dozens; among the most popular are al-Mustabsiruna (the enlightened) and al-Mutahawwiluna (the converted). Both of these sites post lists of the names of hundreds of Sunnis who have converted to Shiism, and also publish letters in which new converts explain how and why they took this step. Naturally, there are also Sunni websites aimed at countering Shiite claims and presenting the stories of Shiites who have converted to the Sunni creed. Among these sites are al-Bayyina and al-Rasid.[10]

* * *

Members of the Shiite community in Jordan belong to a number of different groups of

varying origins. First are the Shiites whose families originally came from Southern Lebanon, especially from Bint Jbeil. More than 5,000 Shiites in Jordan have ancestors who came from southern Lebanon. They left their homes after the town of Bint Jbeil was destroyed by the French in the course of their campaign in Syria and Lebanon after World War I.

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, Bint Jbeil was a major commercial center, whose merchants traveled to northern Palestine, southern Syria and northern Jordan. Many also had homes in these areas. The people of Bint Jbeil rose up against the French mandate in 1920, protesting the establishment of Greater Lebanon, to which the Jabal Amel region was annexed. Following these disturbances, the French sent an expeditionary force of more than 4,000 soldiers, who attacked Jabal Amel and destroyed much of the town of Bint Jbeil.[11] Subsequently many of the city's residents fled to northern Palestine, Jordan and southern Syria, with which they were already familiar due to their previous commercial dealings. They stayed there in the hope of returning some day to their homes. Indeed, many of them did return in the mid-1940s, after the French had been driven out of Lebanon.

The Jordanian Shiites of Lebanese origin live mainly in the province of Irbid (80 km north of the capital Amman), in the city of Ramtha. They've also settled in smaller towns such as al-Tara, Kafr Asad and Dayr Abi Said, and some live in Amman. These Shiites have integrated into their local society, and some have married into Jordanian families. They number close to 3,000 today, the most prominent being the Bayaun, Sad, Dabaja, Firdaws, Juma, al-Sharara, Harb, Barjawi and al-Bazzi families. Although these Shiites have become assimilated, some still symbolically commemorate Shiite occasions.

In the 1990s members of these families made contact with the Shiite al-Khoei Islamic Center in London, with the blessings of Prince Hasan, who encouraged dialogue between the various sects and ethnic groups. However, a proposed Shiite organization, to be named "Abu Durr al-Ghifar," was never established, since the Jordanian authorities had second thoughts and refused to support the idea.

Jordanian officials confirm the existence of Jordanian Shiite families whose members are full-fledged citizens and maintain good relations with the state. Yet, they do not deny doubting the loyalty of some Jordanian Shiites, whom they suspect of having contact with Shiite religious organizations outside the country, and even with Hezbollah. There are also those who say that in the course of the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988), the Jordanian authorities attempted to investigate their Shiite citizens' loyalty, in view of the fact that Jordan sided with Iraq. According to these accounts, Jordanian security services kept a close eye on Jordanian Shiites during and after the war. This scrutiny returned in the wake of the crushed Shiite uprising in southern Iraq in 1991, which deeply affected Jordanian Shiites. As a result, the Jordanian media considered them hostile and suspicions have lingered since.

After the fall of the Saddam Hussein in 2003, a great many Iraqis fled to Jordan, for both personal and economic reasons. Their number was estimated at more than one million, and the majority of them are Shiites. According to some sources, there are currently some 200,000 Iraqi Shiites in Jordan, belonging to two groups. One group consists of poor people who would rather move on to Syria, where the cost of living is lower and where Shiites are freer to practice their faith. This group is attached more to its religious creed than to Arab ideals. The second group consists of more affluent Iraqi Shiites who are imbued with the ideals of Arab nationalism and who likely had good relations with the Baathist Iraqi regime. Members of this group prefer to stay in Jordan, where they do not feel detached from their Arab identity. Many of them are well-educated and familiar with the various Islamic sects and the disputes among them. This group exploited the Jordanian law, recently repealed, which gave Jordanian citizenship to anyone willing to invest at least 15 thousand dinars in the country.

The Iraqi Shiites who have become assimilated into Jordanian society have been able to exert some influence, especially since many people in Jordan do not understand Shiism well. In an interview Muhammad Abu Rumman conducted with Mahir Ismail, the latter told him that a number of his female relatives said that Iraqi Shiite women from wealthy families had befriended Jordanian women and, over a period of time, tried to convert them to Shiism. Along similar lines, Umar Shahin, a resident of al-Zarqa, told an *al-Ghad* reporter that some of his friends were converted by Iraqi Shiites who had come to stay in Jordan but traveled to the Zaynabiyya Hawza in Damascus in order to study the Shiite creed.

The same newspaper also reported that the security services are aware of a number of Shiite religious authorities who live in Jordan and influence both Iraqi Shiites and a growing number of Jordanian converts. One of these lives in the al-Hashimi al-Shimali neighborhood and offers teaching on Shiism in his home. Muhammad Khizai, an Iraqi Shiite who came to Jordan from Damascus, tried to establish a Shiite center, but the Jordanian security services deported him as soon as he arrived.

One of the most prominent Jordanian converts to Shiism is Marwan Khalifat, a young man from Kafr Jayiz by Irbid, who converted during his studies at Sharia College,

where he graduated in 1995. He then went on to study in the city of Qom in Iran and in the Zaynabiyya Hawza in Syria. He currently lives in Sweden. He is the author of a well-known book, *Wa-rakibtu al-safina* (*I Rode the Ship*), published by al-Ghadir in 1997. In this book he relates the disputes and dialogues that accompanied his conversion to the Shiite creed, the role played by a Shiite friend of his in this conversion, and the impact on his beliefs made by Shiite books that criticized the Sunni faith.[12]

Another prominent convert to Shiism is Hasan al-Saqqaf, an elder of the Ashari school and a prominent academic. He adopted the Jafari Shiite creed in the wake of a sharp dispute with the Salafists. The latter have written a number of books attacking his views; prominent among these are Ghalib al-Saqi's two books, *al-Isif fi al-kashf an Haqiqat al-Saqqaf* (*Relief in Exposing the Truth about al-Saqqaf*) and *Kashf al-ghumma fi al-tahdhir min taaddi al-Saqqaf ala ulama al-umma* (*Removing the Veil in Warning against al-Saqqaf's Attack on the Nation's Learned Men*). Both books have been distributed free of charge. Al-Saqqaf also wrote a number of books in response to these Salafist attacks against him, the best-known of which is a book on the Wahhabi Salafists, which has been translated into English. Yet another prominent Jordanian convert to Shiism is attorney Ahmad Husayn Yaqub from Jerash. He was born into a Shafii family in 1939 and studied law at Damascus University. According to his own account, he converted to Shiism following a stay in Beirut, where he read a number of Shiite books that convinced him to adopt the creed.[13]

Shiite students from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Oman also study in Jordan. Although their religious mentors warn them not to proclaim their faith in public, they often attempt to make individual conversions among their Jordanian friends and associates.

* * *

The Iraqi Shiites in Jordan celebrate their religious holidays, such as the Day of Ashura, the birthdays and death-anniversaries of Shiite imams, the Day of Ghadir, and others. The ceremonies and celebrations take place in a number of places. Some are held in private homes, often in underground chambers, especially in the lower-class neighborhoods where many of the Shiites live, such as the well-known al-Mahatta quarter.

According to reports, a number of husayniyyas[14] have been established by Iraqi Shiites in the Jabal Amman al-Sharqiyya neighborhood for small groups wishing to avoid unwanted attention. There are reports of husayniyyas in areas such as al-Nazha and al-Ashrafiyya, attended by Jordanian converts to Shiism, who come to read Husayn's biography and sing religious hymns. One of the best known of these husayniyyas was in Jabal al-Jawfa before its imam, Ali al-Sabari, was arrested by the Jordanian security forces, interrogated and expelled from the country.

Some Shiite ceremonies and celebrations take place in lower-class restaurants run by Iraqi Shiites such as the "al-Azaim," the "Tannur al-Habayib" and the "al-Bash." Shiites gather in these restaurants on religious occasions and hold commemorative ceremonies. They may also watch films about the specific religious occasions being observed and recite elegiac poems such as those written in memory of the death of Husayn on the Day of Ashura. [15] In some instances, a wealthy Shiite will rent an entire restaurant on a holiday and serve the food there free of charge. The only dish cooked on these occasions is *harisa*, which is made of cooked meat and bulgur. Celebrations sometimes are also held in the public parks near the Roman amphitheater and in Hashemite Square. In 2006, a number of Iraqi Shiites filtered into these two places and performed their religious rites, although with a great deal of circumspection.

Shiite holy days are also observed at the mausoleum of Jafar b. Abi Talib,[16] the Prophet's cousin -- also known as Jafar al-Tayyar ("Flying Jafar") – who was killed at the battle of Muta in 629 CE, one of the most important conflicts in the Prophet's lifetime. The mausoleum is located in the southern province of al-Karak, at al-Muta, in an area known as "the southern sanctuary" (c. 160 km south of the capital Amman). The Jordanian authorities have built a large mosque at the site, funded by the Iranian government at a time when the number of Shiite pilgrims to Jordan burgeoned because Iranians were unable to visit Iraqi shrines for two decades during the Iraq-Iran war and its aftermath.

Thousands of Iraqi and Iranian pilgrims come to perform the Ashura rites and others at Jafar's mausoleum. On these public occasions the Jordanian authorities guard the site under the motto of "religious tourism." The Iranian pilgrims also visit the institute and university of Al al-bayt ("The Prophet's family"), founded by Prince Hasan b. Talal. This site houses some of the most ancient extant Shiite manuscripts and books, along with numerous studies whose objective is to bring Sunnis and Shiites closer together. The residents of al-Karak and Muta have sometimes used force to prevent Iraqis from visiting the shrine and the authorities have been compelled to intervene.

Iraqi Shiites in Jordan have attempted to purchase property near Jafar's Shrine and register it in the name of Jordanian citizens. Remarkably, the shrine is not furnished

with any amenities. In the past it even lacked rugs, and people could not sit there for long periods of time. Near the shrine, vendors offer pictures of Shiite personalities such as the Imam Khomeini, Hassan Nasrallah, Muqtada al-Sadr and others, in addition to videos of *latmiyya* ceremonies and the story of the death of Husayn. In the same area "Husseini soil" is sold. [17] The soil is brought in from Iraq, in clods of various shapes: round, rectangular, octagonal or square. Shiites sit on this soil during their prayers.

In the early 1980s, Iran offered to construct the shrine of Jafar, including tourist facilities, at its own expense. However, the late King Hussein (d. 1999) rejected the offer, even though accepting it might well have brought up to a million Iranian tourists to Jordan annually. Later the Jordanian government itself constructed the mausoleum as part of a national project of building shrines over the tombs of the Prophet's Companions.

* * *

The Quds Press news agency has reported that a number of Iraqi Shiite businessmen have applied to the Jordanian Ministry of Religious Endowments (Waqf) for permission to erect the first Shiite mosque and husayniyya in Jordan and to found an association called "al-imam al-Husayn." The site chosen for the construction of the mosque and husayniyya is in the Abdun quarter, one of Amman's more exclusive areas, located in the southern part of the capital. The American Embassy is located in the same neighborhood.

However, at the time of this writing there are no signs that Jordan will give an official permit to build on the property, whose value is estimated at over three million dollars. In fact, the former Jordanian Minister of the Interior, Id al-Fayiz, stated that the Jordanian government would never permit anyone to exploit the climate of pluralism in Jordan and work against the country's national unity. This statement came in the wake of declarations by members of the Muslim Brotherhood, in which they expressed their worries that the government might approve the construction of the husayniyya.

In fact, the Jordanian Minister of Religious Endowments and Islamic Holy Sites, Abd al-Fattah Salah, has denied that any Iraqi group or person has requested the Ministry's permission to establish a husayniyya or Shiite mosque in Jordan. His statement followed media reports that the Iraqi Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr, on a recent visit to Jordan, asked for permission to build at least one husayniyya in the capital Amman, so that Iraqi Shiites would have a place to carry out rituals that differ from those of the local Shiites. The same sources added that al-Sadr claimed such a step would help strengthen the ties between the Iraqi and Jordanian peoples. Previously, the Ministry of Religious Endowments had refused permission to construct a Shiite mosque or a husayniyya in western Amman. Although initial permission was granted by the Ministry, it was revoked in January 2006, under still-unclear circumstances. The request was made by an Iraqi businessman living in Jordan, who offered to construct a large Shiite mosque at his own expense.

The Jordanian authorities thus apparently believe that providing official permission to construct a husayniyya in Amman would give Shiism the status of an officially recognized creed, thereby encouraging conversion to Shiism.

* * *

The conversion of Jordanians to Shiism has begun to arouse both official and unofficial concern in that country. A number of compelling factors have made Shiism attractive to Jordanians—and indeed, for Arab Sunnis as a whole. One of these is the political vacuum created by official Arab regimes, including the Jordanian regime, which have failed to confront the major issues concerning Arabs everywhere: e.g., the Palestinian problem, Iraq and Lebanon. Arab regimes are perceived as serving the interest of a pro-Israel United States, instead of giving support to Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the Iraqi insurgents in their struggle against the American occupation. The Arab man-in-the-street feels that his government lends support to the siege against the Palestinian people, creating a growing gap between subjects and rulers in Arab countries with Sunni majorities.

Iran has been quick to fill this vacuum by offering the Arabs of the Middle East a carefully crafted popular political and cultural message. Iran's political adroitness was clearly evident during the 2006 Lebanon War and in the dispute over Iran's nuclear program. The Arab masses were made to forget Shiite Iran's collusion with America in the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, and they now perceive Iran as the primary champion of the Arabs and the Muslim world. Hezbollah's successes against Israel in southern Lebanon also had a great influence; the organization is seen as the bearer of Arab hopes to retrieve their honor and national will.

In fact, the honor of the Arab peoples, which according to popular opinion has been disgraced by the policies of the Arab governments, has been redeemed by "Shiite achievements" in the struggle against America and Israel. For many Arabs, who ask themselves how it is that the Shiites do what the Arab peoples think should be done, the answer is to be found in Shiite culture and literature, which, so they believe,

contain the key to understanding the causes of power, influence and success.

Sunni youth in Jordan do not possess the authoritative sources and debating skills of their Shiite counterparts, and therefore find themselves in an unequal confrontation in which the Shiites usually dominate. When one considers the poor religious education of many Sunnis together with the way many Arab regimes treat their own subjects, it is no wonder that conversion to Shiism is on the rise.

In Jordan the regime's behavior and the lack of religious culture has produced a particularly fertile ground in which conversion to Shiism can flourish. Consequently, the Iraqi Shiites in Jordan have penetrated every stratum of Jordanian society and proven themselves capable of holding their own in political and cultural debates with Jordanians. The anti-American feelings of many Jordanians also contributed to the wave of conversion to Shiism, especially in light of the proven Shiite capacity for action, as shown by the success of Hezbollah and of Iran's nuclear program. Hamas, which is also very popular among Jordanians, has played an important role in alleviating anti-Iranian feelings as well, since many Jordanians are grateful for Iranian aid to Hamas. As a result, Jordanians first become political adherents of Shiism; they then may also adopt the Shiite religious creed.

Future developments depend to a large extent on the actions and behavior of the Jordanian government, on how the conflict between America and Iran evolves, and on political events in Iraq. If Iraq stabilizes, most of the Iraqis now living in Jordan will return home, and the direct contact that now occurs between Jordanians and Iraqi Shiites will come to an end. If the Iraqi problem is solved, the attraction of Shiism for Sunnis will perhaps wane as well, because Shiism's present good reputation in the region owes much to its anti-American stand. If Shiites and America end their state of conflict, conversion to Shiism in Jordan will in all likelihood decline. To put the matter succinctly, future political developments in the region will determine the future of conversion to Shiism in Jordan. This will especially remain the case for as long as the official policies of Arab states do not take their own peoples' wishes into account.

Khalid Sindawi is senior lecturer at Max Stern Academic College, Israel.

This article will appear in Volume 10 of ***Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*** *published by Hudson Institute.*

Keywords: Jordan, Shiism, Iran, Hezbollah

[1] The newspaper *al-Bayyina*, issue 478, August 12, 2007.

[2] The "fifth" is the proportion of every Shiite's income, from whatever source, which he is required to give to the community. Shiites divide the "fifth" into six parts: one part to God, one to the prophets, one to relatives, one to orphans, one to the poor, and one to wayfarers. The first three parts, God's, the prophets' and relatives,' are considered to belong to the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*). Fully half of the "fifth" thus goes to the imams and their families. For more details on the "fifth" in the Shiite faith see: Calder, N., "Khums in Imami Shii Jurisprudence from the Tenth to the Sixteenth Century A.D," *BSOAS* (1982), 1-45; Sachededina Abudulaziz "Al-Khums: The Fifth in the Imami Shii Legal System" *JNES* 39 (1980), 275-289.

[3] See the Thaqlin website, **www.althqlin.net/forum/showthread.php?t=13565**.

[4] Riya Manour, "al-Shiia fi al-Urdunn," *al-Madina* (Saudi Arabia), 22, February 2007.

[5] An Iraqi satellite television channel, which broadcasts at present from Ajman. It began its broadcasts on July 20, 2004 and is registered in Dubai. It employs about40 media professionals in addition to the management. Al-Fayhaa broadcasts various programs in addition to the news. For more details see the station's website, **http://alfayhaa.tv/**.

[6] A subscription Shiite satellite station broadcasting from Kuwait, where it is licensed. It broadcasts Shiite religious programs, especially on the self-infliction ceremonies in the months of Muharram and Safar. For more details see the station's website, **http://www.alanwartv.com/**.

[7] A Shiite station which broadcasts from Iran. Its Arabic program first went on the air in 1980, when it was called the Sahar channel and broadcast one hour a day. Today it broadcasts eighteen hours daily. For more details see the station's website, **http://www.alkawthar.ir/**.

[8] The Islamic satellite channel Ahl al-bayt broadcasts from Karbala. It began operating on October 14, 2005. For more details see the station's website, **http://www.ahlulbayt.com/**.

[9] Hezbollah founded this Shiite channel in Lebanon in 1991. Since the year 2000 it has been broadcasting 24/7. It has hundreds of employees and broadcasts worldwide. For more details on the station see Dina Matar "What It Means to Be Shiite in Lebanon: Al-Manar and the Imagined Community of Resistance," Westminster Papers in

Communication and Culture 2006 (University of Westminster, London) vol. 3(2): 22-40.

[10] Muhammad Abu Rumman, “al-Tashayyu fi al-Urdunn” (“Conversion to Shiism in Jordan”), *al-Ghad* (a Jordanian newspaper), October 4-5, 2006.

[11] For details see: Mustafa Bazzi, *Jabal Amil fi muitihi al-arabi* (*Jabal Amil in its Arab Surroundings*), (Beirut: Research and Documentation Center of the Supreme Islamic Shiite Council, al-Rihani publications, 1993), p. 211; idem, *Bint Jbel ÎaÃirat Jabal Amil* (*Bint Jbel Capital of the Jabal Amil Region*), (Beirut: Dar al-amir lil-thaqafa wal-ulum, 1998), pp. 498-499.

[12] Muhammad Abu Rumman, “al-Tashayyu fi al-Urdunn,” *al-Ghad*, October 4-5, 2006.

[13] *Ibid*.

[14] *Husayniyya*: a Shiite building used for holding the annual commemorative services in remembrance of the death of al-Husyan b. Ali. The fact that Shiites have a specific structure just for this purpose shows the importance they attach to Husayn’s death and its commemoration. Most of the husayniyyas in the Shiite holy cities are also used as pilgrim hostels, free of charge. The various husayniyyas are usually named after the people of the city who founded them, such as the Esfahani husayniyya, the Teherani husayniyya, and so on. Husayniyyas of this type can be found in the cities of Najaf, Karbala, Mashhad, and elsewhere. They are not considered mosques, and do not have the restrictions on visitors that the latter have, especially concerning entry by non-Muslims. In some areas of Lebanon they are called *al-nadi al-Husayni* (“Hussein Club”), such as the one in Tyre in southern Lebanon. In the Persian Gulf area, husayniyyas are known as “al-matam” (“funeral rites”). In Bahrain, for example, there are today some 3,500 “maatim Husayniyya,” reflecting the frequency with which they are used. In India and Pakistan they are called “imam bareh” (“the imam’s center”), i.e., the center of the imam al-Husayn. The buildings themselves do not have any constant shape. Some husayniyyas have large, mosque-like spaces while others are more like lecture halls, with rows of chairs and a raised dais in front. The former type is common in Iraq, Kuwait and elsewhere in the Persian Gulf region while the second type is frequently encountered in Lebanon. There are separate husayniyyas for women in Lebanon, the Gulf and elsewhere. Some husayniyyas stand by themselves and others are attached to mosques. The oldest extant husayniyya is the “Imam Dalan” husayniyya in Dacca, Bangladesh, which was constructed in 1642 CE. The husayniyyas play an important religious, social, political and cultural role. Since the beginning of the 20th century they have functioned as social and cultural clubs where people meet and exchange views and information. They are especially active during religious holidays. For more details see the author’s paper: Sindawi, K., “The Husayni Sermon (al-Khutba al-husayniyya) in Shiite Literature: Development, Structure, Venue, Preachers’ Titles,” *Orientalia Suecana* 54 (2005), 151-178.

[15] These poems are called *latmiyya* in Iraq, Bahrain and Kuwait, because those who attend the reading of these poems beat (*latm* in Arabic) their chests in grief. The latmiyya poems are recited during the day and at night on numerous occasions in the Shiite calendar, especially the death-anniversaries of the imams and Fatima. The most important occasion is the anniversary of the death of Husayn in the month of Muharram. Then Shiites gather together in a single procession, headed by a reciter of verses (called *radud* in colloquial Iraqi Arabic, because he repeats the elegiac lines of poetry to the crowd beating themselves) who relates the catastrophes which have befallen the Prophet’s family.

[16] He was the brother of Ali b. Talib. He died after both his hands were cut off in battle.

[17] For more on “Husseini soil” and its uses see the author’s paper: Sindawi, K., “Holy Earth: The Importance of the Land of Karbala for the Shia,” *Islamic Culture* 77(3) (2003), 73-84.